he would have admired their ingenuity, now it made further investigation pointless. He didn't bother to proscribe gossip; it was pointless to give orders he couldn't enforce. Instead he recommended that they all find someone to double up with for the rest of the night. He posted two guards in the corridor, and left them to sort out room assignments among themselves. When security had combed the ship for an hour without finding anything, Kirk stopped riding them and went to McCoy's office to wait for his report. The doctor's face was grim when he finally came in. He opened his hoard of brandy and poured two hefty doses, tossed his back like vodka.

"She bled to death, Jim--not that we could have stopped it. Someone or something almost tore her apart. It was a sexual assault."

"Any clue--?"

"No. Nothing. No tissue, blood, hairs under her nails. There was no sign she put up a struggle at all."

"You said it was a sexual assault?"

"Yes."

"Can't you type the sperm--find out who did it?"

"There wasn't any. I'm not even sure it was a who, Jim. There was no sign of any wound caused by a weapon--just blunt claw marks, not unlike what Spock and T'serek brought back from Ixmahx. I suppose a karate expert could drive his fingers that deep in human flesh, but no ordinary person could. Are you positive they didn't bring anything back with them?"

Kirk shrugged. They had both been in the transporter room. The Speaker and three of his own crew had verified the death of the host of the Ixmahx artifact, and even if that hadn't killed it, nothing could survive an antimatter explosion. The entire volcano had been destroyed. The Romulans had not tried to contact the surface, and they certainly hadn't contacted the Enterprise. Eliminate the impossible and what remained was a member of his crew.

"How could anyone that screwed up ever get starship duty?"

"They couldn't," McCoy said certainly. "The psychosis would have to be situational--somehow related to events occurring aboard ship or during a leave. Even so I run a routine check on everyone who's been off the ship any length of time."

"How about the people who were down on Ixmahx?" He didn't say, how about Spock? Didn't have to. Could not believe that he had said as much as he had. "Did you test them?"

McCoy swirled the dregs of his drink around. "Not yet. Did you talk to--"

"Not yet," Kirk echoed. "He wants to bury it. I don't want to single anyone out. Test them all and let me know." But he knew already, without any test at all, that Spock had returned from Ixmahn wounded in more than body.

By the time Kirk reported to the bridge the next day everyone on board knew that a crewwoman named Mele Anderson had been murdered, knew that security had not found the killer. By 0900 they knew that a computer check had verified the location of all crewmembers during the approximate time of the murder. Kirk once again stopped energy transmissions, and that got a garbled version of the Ixmahx mission circulating through the ship, so that by the end of the working day, speculation had solidified into suspicion that there was an alien shape-changer aboard. By the time the computer cycled the lights down to approximate evening, Kirk was noticing that people tended to clump into twos and threes in the corridors.

He was half hoping that McCoy wouldn't have found any abberations in Spock's psychological profile, but they were glaringly apparant when McCoy threw two charts on a screen for comparison.

"There's no doubt it's significant, Jim. How he keeps functioning I don't know. When I had him in here he seemed more stressed, if anything. 'Meditation' might just be an excuse to keep out of my way."

"What about the shape-changer idea?" McCoy would have heard about that, too.

"Not unless it's good enough to give human blood and urine--or in Spock's case, let me probe around in its innards. I'm sorry, but the people we brought back are just that." McCoy picked up the data cube from his desk, dropped it in Kirk's palm. "That's my report on his injuries. I was going to lose it anyway."

Kirk headed back to his cabin, kicking himself for what he knew he had to do. He could smell the fear in the deserted corridors and he knew the price in morale alone the unsolved crime was causing. Knew too, from long experience, that trouble is never stopped without effort. There was no way around a confrontation with Spock. What had happened to him had also happened to Mele Anderson--but she was beyond questioning, and Spock could, possibly, tell them what had happened to him, help prevent its happening again to someone else. He tossed the cube on his desk, paged Spock, and moved restlessly around, cramped for space, wishing for a window to stare out of. When the buzzer sounded, he forced himself to stillness.

"Captain?" The tall Vulcan stood in the doorway.

He stands so straight, Kirk thought. He kept going through hell with his guts bleeding, and now that he has a chance to heal, I have to rip him open again. God, I hate this job.

"Sit down, Mr. Spock. We missed you on the bridge today. I hope you're feeling better?"

"Thank you, Captain. I am much improved."

Like hell you are. You're pale as a ghost and holding yourself together with sheer will power. McCoy shouldn't have let you leave sickbay. The data cube lay on his desk looking innocuous. It might have been a sound and light recording, or Ovid's Metamorphosis, or a report on V'ei'drei's production of quadrotriticale. "I'm glad to hear that," he said. Spouting cliches like a cadet, looking anywhere but at the arrow straight Vulcan before him. Think he won't notice that?

"Can I assist you, Captain?"

Or, in more delicate words, cut the crap and at least have the decency to look at him when you shove the knife in. "Yes, you can. Mele Anderson was raped and killed last night. We haven't got a clue as to who or what did it. But McCoy reports a similar, recent attack in which the victim survived." Kirk pointed to the data cube. "That's the medical record. We don't have to look at it,